

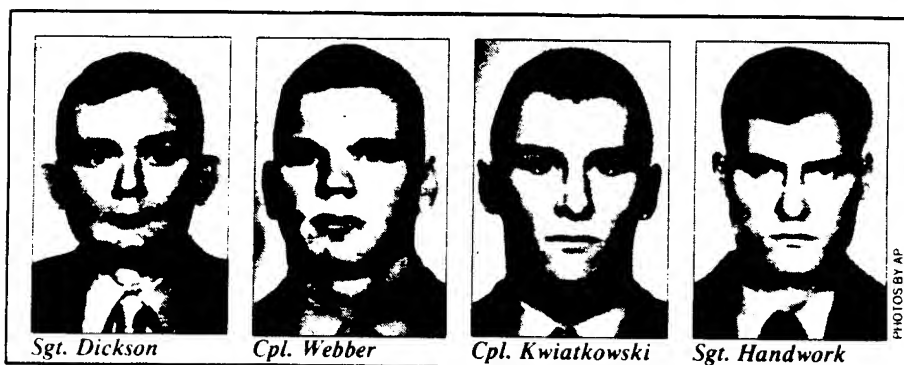
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# A Cafe Massacre

Gunmen kill 13—including 6 Americans—as frustrated Salvadoran rebels bring the war to the city.



Sgt. Dickson

Cpl. Webber

Cpl. Kwiatkowski

Sgt. Handwork

**L**a Zona Rosa seemed worlds away from El Salvador's civil war. U.S. Marine Sgt. Tom Handwork had just joined a girlfriend at Chili's, an outdoor café in San Salvador's most fashionable district. Three fellow Marines sat nearby, quietly sipping their beers. Shortly before 9 p.m. two vehicles pulled up outside the café, and approximately 10 young men in military camouflage T shirts piled out. "¡Viva El Salvador!" cried the leader of the group as his followers opened fire. They gunned down the four Marines with automatic rifles and fired indiscriminately through the sidewalk restaurants that lined the street. Thirteen people died in the furious attack, and at least 15 more were wounded. According to some survivors, the gunmen returned to the fallen Marines to pump additional rounds into their bodies. Then they disappeared into the depths of the city, leaving behind a gruesome montage of shattered bottles, corpses and blood.

"It was democracy that was attacked last night," declared U.S. Embassy spokesman Don Hamilton. "The United States was among the victims." In addition to the Marines, all of whom served as embassy guards, two American businessmen died in the massacre. The deaths marked the first time that an American serviceman had been killed in El Salvador since the murder of Navy Lt. Cmdr. Albert Schaufelberger in May 1983, and for Ronald Reagan, already living through the agony of the

Mideast hostage crisis, they were a final straw. "This cannot continue," Reagan declared, promising to speed delivery of \$128 million in military aid Congress had already approved for El Salvador. "We must act against those who have so little regard for human life and the values we cherish."

A tiny rebel faction, the Central American Revolutionary Workers Party (PRTC), claimed responsibility for the attack. "The first American Marines have begun to fall," it gloated in a communiqué. "The Marines killed in the Zona Rosa were not innocent; no Yankee invader is free of guilt." The assassins professed to "lament profoundly" the fact that some Salvadorans had been killed in the gunfire. Nonetheless, they vowed to treat as "military targets" any restaurants or merchants that serve U.S. military personnel.

**Losses:** Ironically, Salvadoran officials regarded the Zona Rosa massacre as evidence that the war against the leftist rebels was being won. Earlier this month, government troops launched a major offensive in the northeastern department of Morazán, a stronghold of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) for the past 5½ years. Air Force planes strafed rebel positions as five Army battalions moved in on the ground—and the FMLN was clearly hurt. Captured documents suggested that the rebels were turning to terrorism to recoup their recent losses in the field. Over the past six months the guerril-

las have been responsible for the kidnapping or killing of numerous Salvadoran mayors, bureaucrats and military officers—and U.S. and Salvadoran officials had been warning of an upsurge in urban violence. "The fact that [the guerrillas] have returned to the city is clear proof of their losses in the countryside," said Maj. Carlos Aviles, chief spokesman for the Salvadoran armed forces.

U.S. officials speculated that the rebels may have hoped to goad the Salvadoran government into a repressive backlash. But one official in Washington said, "I think the Salvadorans have come too far to let it happen." Still last week's massacre represented the first time since 1980 that El Salvador's capital had been hit by a crime of such violent proportions—and military officials doubled San Salvador's police protection. If there are other attacks, it seems likely that the city will return to the repressive police control that had been relaxed only in recent years.

**Desertions:** Military analysts maintain that while the rebels are far from defeated, they have clearly lost their earlier momentum. According to Napoleón Romero, a former guerrilla leader who defected to the government last April, the five main rebel groups have between 6,000 and 7,000 fighters, down sharply from the 9,000 to 10,000 they had in 1983. And while the rebels have large numbers of weapons buried around the countryside, Romero told his interrogators, they are receiving less than half the ammunition they require each month. As a result, say U.S. officials, rebel morale is suffering; desertions are rampant, and some commanders have been forced to take "extreme measures," including executions, to keep their troops in the field.

Simultaneously, U.S. officials say there has been a marked improvement in the effectiveness of the government troops. In June 1984 the FMLN won a significant psychological victory when 1,000 rebels overran the sentry posts at the Cerrón Grande dam and destroyed enough equipment to shut down El Salvador's largest hydroelectric generating station for a month. But more significant was the way in which the government forces managed to drive the rebels away. "The Salvadoran Army reaction was picture perfect," recalls one American official. Improved training and growing experience with guerrilla warfare have brought new and more capable commanders to the top. American trucks and helicopters have greatly increased the Army's tactical mobility, and the government forces are also benefiting from better intelligence. "Certainly nobody's going to put up a signpost that victory is two miles ahead," says a Defense Department analyst. "But the war has been turned around."

The Salvadoran government also seems

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to be gaining the upper hand politically—at least against the right. Following his unexpectedly strong victory in the General Assembly elections last March, President José Napoleón Duarte has managed to consolidate power and defuse the threat of such extreme right-wing populists as Roberto D'Aubuisson. But he still faces a strong political challenge from militant left-wing labor unions, many of which the government accuses of being infiltrated by the rebels. Whatever the case, the electoral victory gave Duarte more freedom to negotiate with the guerrillas. Not that the talks will be easy. "He expects [that] it's going to be a long process," says a State Department official, "and that not all the guerrillas will end up on board."

In Washington the secret hope is that lengthy negotiations against a backdrop of increasing government strength will drive a wedge between the rival rebel factions. Still, U.S. officials planned to provide more support. In addition to expediting the military aid, Reagan promised to make available any "additional military assets" the Duarte

government might need. White House spokesman Larry Speakes suggested that the administration might send a group of FBI agents to El Salvador to provide technical help in finding the killers as well as improving the country's overall intelligence-gathering capacity.

**Security:** Better intelligence will not be enough to safeguard U.S. lives from more terrorist attacks.

As was the case with the Americans hijacked in the Mideast, the slain Marines apparently fell victim to lax security. Following the death of Schaufelberger, who was shot as he sat in a car waiting for a girlfriend, the U.S. Embassy warned its personnel to avoid vulnerable spots, such as the sidewalk cafés of the Zona Rosa. Yet the Marine guards were frequently spotted at restaurants such as Chili's. On the night of the shooting, said one witness, the Marines were approached by a young man who chatted with them briefly and then bicycled away. Ten minutes later, the gunmen appeared and opened fire. State Department officials said they found it hard to understand why the Marines did not take greater precautions, particularly since the most recent intelligence reports indicated that the guerrillas might be stepping up their attacks on American military personnel. The Marines "obviously had ... some sense that there was some safety in a crowd," said American Embassy spokesman Hamilton. But "against people willing to kill so wantonly, there is obviously no protection in a crowd."

While Salvadoran police and military continued to search for clues to the identities of the killers, President Duarte traveled to the Ilopango military airport in El Salvador late last week to watch the flag-draped Marine coffins depart for the United States. "Like brothers," he said, "we have felt the loss of these four men who had come to our country to serve." Assistant Secretary of State Robert Lamb concluded a tearful eulogy by naming the slain Marines. "Sgt. Bobby Dickson, Sgt. Thomas Handwork, Cpl. Patrick Kwiatkowski, Cpl. Gregory Webber," he said, "we are proud of you and we've come to take you home." Ronald Reagan presided over the Marines' emotional arrival at Andrews Air Force Base. "We know that no words can console," he told their grieving families, "but we thank you for your sons."

HARRY ANDERSON with LIZ BALMAEDA  
in San Salvador and JANE WHITMORE and  
JOHN WALCOTT in Washington